

11 Land of beasts and dragons

Contemporary myth-making in rural Wales

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Myth as it exists in a savage community, that is, in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. This myth is to the savage what, to a fully believing Christian, is the Biblical story of Creation, of the Fall, of the Redemption by Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross. As our sacred story lives in our ritual, in our morality, as it governs our faith and controls our conduct, even so does his myth for the savage.

(Malinowski 2004: 78)

Ever since Bacon, science has insisted on discovering the truth of what is there, and thus on the strict separation of fact and interpretation.

(Ingold 2013a: 745)

Introduction

There are several themes to be addressed in this chapter. First, liminality was a key issue which surfaced repeatedly during the course of my research into so-called Alien Big Cat (ABC) sightings in Wales, UK (where 'Alien' reflects the animals' non-endemic status). The unknown nature, origin and behaviours of the cats; the presence of these creatures in a landscape which is not their native 'home'; and the difficulties associated with verifying their presence are all factors which contribute to the status of ABCs as 'matter out of place'. The question of authority in relation to the validity of sightings has also come to the fore more recently, and this is another theme which will be considered here. I argue that authority (in the sense of whose accounts are credible) is linked to the liminal or transgressive nature of ABCs, (and this applies also to cryptozoological entities or 'cryptids' more generally). Their unknown and unknowable status makes them risky subjects for authority figures to deal with and a balance is sought between the reality of a sighting as a visceral, tangible experience for the individual in question, and the need to account for what could otherwise be dismissed as the product of an over-active imagination. In his recent writing, Ingold (2013a and 2013b) has argued that engaging

with cryptids (although he doesn't refer to them as such) can heal what he sees as the rupture 'between the real world and our imagination of it' (2013b: 749). By taking the existence of ABCs seriously I seek to reflect on the uneasy relationships between anthropology and relativism on the one hand, and science and imagination on the other, both of which are key aspects of the recent ontological turn in anthropology.

The symbolism of ABCs

ABC sightings in the UK, as with sightings of or encounters with most cryptozoological entities, are the stuff of myth, legend and contested narrative. Malinowski, one of the founding fathers of British social anthropology, recognised the 'function' of myths in all human societies; myths are useful vehicles for encoding and expressing information which is important within any given socio-cultural context. Contemporary myths, such as those which have arisen around cryptids, can also be seen to serve important social functions. Sometimes cautionary or moral tales, they can also expose the relationships between different strata of the society, provided, as Douglas (1996) cautions, they are considered within their specific social and historical context (see also Attala; Bernard; Heneise; High; King; and Merz, this volume).

There is precedent for cryptids playing a symbolic role in the complex relationships between Wales and England in the UK, between an 'internal colony' (Hechter 1977) and the sovereign power whose laws impact on the lives and livelihoods of the colonised. While the patron saint of England, St George, is credited with slaying a dragon, the iconic Welsh dragon of the national flag represents the power of the tribes of Wales in the past and the pride and resilience of the country's contemporary inhabitants. Dragons, or their 'known' palaeontological equivalents¹, no longer roam the Welsh valleys and hillsides, yet something of *y draig's* enigmatic ability to mobilise and fortify the nation is retained, or rather reinvented, in contemporary myths surrounding ABC sightings. When viewed in such a light, the 'reality' of big cats is arguably less important than their role as trope or archetypal figure in a politically charged narrative concerning the place of marginalised rural communities in a globalised world. Indeed, contemporary myths are often reflections of real life concerns as exemplified in Scheper-Hughes' (2001) research on 'body snatchers' and the illegal trade in human organs, and West's (2005) discussions of the were-lions who terrorised politically disenfranchised rural peasants in post-war Mozambique. Consequently, characters such as ABCs might be regarded as manifestations of the fears associated with change, resistance or a loss of control (or all of the above) (Ingold 2013a and 2013b. See also Heneise; High; and Merz, this volume). And yet cryptids arguably also instil a sense of fear in those who see them or believe in their existence, be it a fear of the unknown or a fear of what these 'unknown' creatures are capable of! They are also, in this fieldwork context at least, experienced as real, regardless of their symbolic potency.

The increasing propensity for humans to keep non-endemic or 'exotic' animals as pets in many parts of the 'developed' or 'post-domestic' world (for example Jaclin 2013), especially animals such as big cats, bears, chimpanzees or alligators who can pose a very real threat to human physical safety and well-being, could be viewed as a form of risk-taking enacted by individuals who feel particularly alienated from society. Indeed, the large body of anthropological and sociological material on risk-taking (e.g. Lyng 2004; Wacquant 2004), building on seminal works such as Beck (1992), Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) and Giddens (1991) suggests that in taking risks and negotiating them successfully individuals are able to regain some form of control over their otherwise chaotic lives (see also Attala, this volume). They are also able to attain status as a result of their close associations with potentially dangerous animals (see also Goldman and Walsh, this volume), as clearly evidenced in the relationships between certain disempowered youths and stigmatised 'dangerous' dog breeds which is widely documented (e.g. Burley 2008; Caglar 1997).

In my previous discussion of non-endemic big cat sightings (Hurn 2009), I argued that big cats sighted in the part of rural west Wales where I have conducted fieldwork over a period of twelve years, become metaphors for disenfranchised Welsh farmers, enacting a ritual of resistance which emulates the struggle for sovereignty of 'the Welsh' in the political landscape created during the ongoing process of devolution. I maintain that sightings confer a certain status on individuals within a community united by antipathy to external legislation designed (so it is thought) to curtail rights and destroy livelihoods. The 'origin myth' of ABCs in my fieldwork context casts them as former exotic pets who were also subjected to English legislation (the 1976 Dangerous Wild Animals Act – see also Franklin, this volume). Their mythological status hinges on the fact that sightings imply some individuals were able to overcome attempts to legislate against them by evading capture and surviving in the Welsh hills. Their ability to survive against the odds renders them iconic symbols of resistance and freedom. These animals have achieved what many of my Welsh farming informants continue to strive for. Having attended the 2002 Liberty and Livelihood March in central London (accompanying a coach-load of Welsh farmers), which saw rural dwellers descend on the (English) capital in their thousands to show support for a host of 'rural' issues and protest against the proposed ban on fox hunting, and having attended hunt functions and meets in the run-up to and following the 2004 Hunting Act, which saw fox hunting with hounds banned, I can recognise that for the farmers in my fieldwork context, ABCs can indeed be viewed as highly politicised animals, 'as a kind of return of the repressed [...] celebrated as forms of "defiance and resistance"' (Wilbert 2006: 45). The fact that official bodies refute claims and sightings makes locals all the more adamant that they are right. Therefore, it would appear that the presence of ABCs, who has seen them, and who believes their stories, has become symptomatic of wider conflict, and sightings become yet another marker of 'belonging' in a rural community, or simply a lived reality for individuals united by a shared mode of subsistence or lifestyle (see also Franklin, this volume).

Authoritative sources and the burden of proof

Much of the public and academic debate over cryptids concerns whether or not they exist, and if their existence can be proved, determining what type of creature(s) they are (see Forth; Walsh and Goldman; and Turner, this volume). Eberhart's definition of cryptozoology as 'the study of the evidence for animals that are undescribed by science' (Eberhart 2002: xlvii) immediately prioritises 'scientific' discovery and taxonomic classification over folk sightings and experiences. This emphasis on evidence which can satisfy scientific rigour is significant. Science is, after all, widely perceived and promoted as the arbiter of truth and the need for scientific accountability certainly has had, and continues to have, implications for how individuals within this particular fieldwork context, and many of the others described in this volume, think about the presence of cryptids in their lives.

It is perhaps worth noting here that my interest in and subsequent investigation of ABC sightings was largely serendipitous. When I set out to study a small farming community in west Wales for my doctorate in 2000 I certainly did not envisage any encounters with cryptids. However, not only did my hunting and farming informants let slip periodically that they had seen big cats locally, leading me to attempt to systematically collect their oral testimonies, but forensic taphonomist Ros Coard of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David had, unbeknown to me at the start of my fieldwork, been conducting forensic analysis on the carcasses of prematurely deceased livestock found in my fieldwork area in order to ascertain whether or not they bore the hallmarks of big cat kills (Coard 2007).

I initially found myself making value judgements as to the 'authority' of each individual informant and the resultant reliability or truth of their sighting experience. If I'm honest, my concern when the subject of big cat sightings arose was that I was the victim of an elaborate ruse (see also King, this volume). However, as the number of sightings recounted to me increased, I began to take them more seriously. In many respects this sort of value judgement goes on whenever people claim to have seen or experienced things which might appear inexplicable to the uninitiated, as most of the contributions to this volume demonstrate. I also found myself the object of scepticism during an interview about my research on the BBC Radio 4 programme *Thinking Allowed*. In his closing comments the interviewer, Laurie Taylor, jocularly urged his listeners to get in touch if they too had experienced glowing eyes or things going bump in the night. In the wake of that interview being broadcast, however, I received numerous e-mails and phone calls from listeners across the UK who had indeed seen what they thought were big cats or the hallmarks of big cat predations. Many had kept their experiences to themselves precisely because of a fear of how their accounts would be received by others.

In a previous publication on big cat sightings in west Wales, and firmly under the influence of post-enlightenment ontology, I concluded that the animals my informants claimed to have seen could be explained in 'rational' terms

(Hurn 2009) – a view supported by Coard's scientific evidence. These cryptids might reasonably be real 'flesh and blood' animals. My process of rationalisation and the eventual conclusion in my own mind that ABCs were indeed real was a combination of science, folk knowledge and personal experience, including Coard's forensic evaluation; the patterns of predation which my informants described (including sheep carcasses lodged in forked tree branches several metres above the ground); the sheer volume and consistency of sighting experiences; and, most significant of all, my own encounter with a (suspected) ABC. The latter, which occurred late one night as we walked through a large field, certainly felt very real for both me and my dog Max (a large German Shepherd) – we were terrified! On our nightly walks Max habitually ran on ahead enjoying the smells and sounds of nocturnal wildlife, but on this occasion something stopped him in his tracks and he yelped and bolted back to me hackles raised, tail between his legs and trembling. I shone my torch in the direction from which he had come and caught the gleaming eyes of a large, predatory animal in the beam – predatory as the eyes were positioned so as to be looking straight at us (as opposed to on the side of the head as was the case with the 'prey' animals of that size we usually encountered – mountain ponies and sheep) – and set within a large, dark body. I had spent some time conducting participant observation with lampers (hunters who hunt at night using lamps and rifles) in the area, and was familiar with the signature reflections of the *tapetum lucidum* (the layer of reflective tissue at the back of the retina) from different animal species including foxes, badgers, rabbits, domestic cats, dogs, sheep and horses. These eyes were different. They were higher off the ground, larger, and the reflection was much yellower than any I had seen before. Max's reaction too convinced me that this was not an animal he had encountered previously (and was not one he wanted to encounter again!).

Thereafter my interviews with informants took a different turn. I found that people were much more forthcoming with detailed information if I shared our (mine and Max's) experience. Up until that point I had received lots of sightings accounts but it wasn't until I was one of the initiated that people began to alert me to the historical precedent for big cats in the area (see also Bernard, this volume). According to these narratives (or perhaps more appropriately 'foundation myths'), a local scrap dealer kept two melanistic leopards as exotic security guards at his yard. These animals mysteriously disappeared in the late 1970s or early 1980s (I received conflicting accounts regarding the date of their disappearance) in the wake of the 1976 Dangerous Wild Animals Act. As one informant who had visited the site as a child in the 1970s recalled: 'He had this huge black cat on a chain. It scared the s*** out of me. Better than a guard dog any day!'

As my fieldwork progressed and the number of sightings I had collected reached the 100 mark, I began to realise that the presence of these animals was widely accepted by my informants at an informal, community level. This was partly because if individuals hadn't seen an ABC themselves, they knew someone who had. The authorities on the other hand have, until recently, felt very differently. However, in 2011 Pembrokeshire County Council issued a

statement confirming the presence of big cats in the area. The statement followed the sighting of a large black felid reported to the police and the media by a member of the council staff. What made this sighting particularly credible, according to media reports and the statement issued by the council offices, was the fact that the individual in question was a former police officer, and therefore a reliable and authoritative witness (see also Monbiot 2013). The following passage is from a statement released by the council and published in the national press, and has been quoted in full to reveal the level of detail included in a bid to convince the wider readership:

Mr Disney's encounter happened in broad daylight in countryside six miles north of Haverfordwest, near Treffgarne village. He was driving his council car on a single track road at 15mph when a large black 'puma or panther' crossed five metres in front of him. 'I immediately stopped my vehicle and stared at this animal. It had a large cat-like head, muscular build and was approximately three feet tall,' he said. 'It was bigger and more muscular than a German Shepherd dog. The coat was smooth and looked like it had brown spots on it. 'I had a clear, unobstructed view of the animal and the visibility was excellent. The animal was in my view for fully five to six seconds, the time it took to cover the width of the road and then disappear into the undergrowth at the side.' He added: 'I am 100% certain that this was a puma or panther-like animal and was definitely not a dog, cat or any other domestic animal. It was not something I had seen before other than in a zoo.' He called in at a local farm soon after and was told that a large puma-like animal was nearby a few weeks earlier. Chief Inspector Steve Matchett of Dyfed Powys Police said: 'We are aware of a possible big cat sighting in the Treffgarne area of north Pembrokeshire, which occurred on Wednesday. We're working with all relevant agencies including Pembrokeshire County Council and the Welsh Assembly Government's Big Cat Sighting Unit has also been informed. While the public should not be alarmed by this latest possible sighting, we would urge anyone who does see what they think might be a big cat not to approach the animal and to stay a safe distance away from it.' The last publicised incident in the county was in November when a sheep carcass was reported to bear the hallmarks of a big cat kill. Pembrokeshire Council's public protection chief Mark Elliott said: 'We believe this is the closest anyone has been to a big cat in the wild and is further proof that there is at least one large animal roaming free in Pembrokeshire.'

(Stone 2011: n.p.)²

The sighting happened in 'broad daylight', and the witness was driving an official vehicle. Exact measurements were given (such as the driving speed, and the distance between the car and the animal) all in a bid to communicate that this was, indeed, a plausible event. In a subsequent interview with *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot, Mr Disney reiterated the validity of his sighting:

If I'd been dreaming or thinking about them at the time, it might have been another matter. But it was the last thing on my mind. I was just driving along – and one crosses the road. He was probably about 3 feet high and six feet long. I would say bigger than a medium-sized dog, but definitely not a dog. He was powerful-looking, with a black, glossy, shiny coat, incredibly muscular, like a horse's shoulders.

(In Monbiot 2013: n.p.)

Mr Disney used a German Shepherd dog as a comparative for the black felid who had crossed his path, and during my own fieldwork many informants also observed the similarity between the animal they saw and a big dog, often pointing to Max, who accompanied me everywhere, to indicate approximate proportions. For example, one man described driving up the track to his farm and seeing a large, black, athletic animal loping across the field in front of him before disappearing into the adjacent woodland:

It was only a few seconds it was there. I thought it was a big dog [gestures in Max's direction], but it had a long, thin tail and it didn't move like a dog. My neighbour's got a Huntaway [another large breed of shepherding dog] so I phoned her soon as I got in the house and told her it'd escaped. She said it hadn't, it was sat with her in the kitchen! She said it must've been the 'Beast of Bont!' and we 'ad a good laugh.

I pushed him further. 'Well, I dunno what it was. It looked like a f***in' big black dog, but not quite, you know?' He went on to say that he had brought all of his 'stock' (i.e. livestock – in this case, sheep and horses) to bed down in the barn that evening, just in case.

Interestingly, black dog apparitions are common in many parts of the world and throughout history. In all contexts where sightings have been recorded of them these apparitions are typically seen as portents of imminent death (hence the belief that they are the guides who escort the recently deceased to *Annwn*, the underworld of Welsh mythology), or as harbingers of bad luck (Sherwood 2000). Certainly for many farmers a big cat sighting could lead to livestock predation which could result in death (of sheep) and bad luck (for both sheep and farmer). However, while informants frequently likened the subject of their sightings to big, black, enigmatic dogs, there was always something about the creature (e.g. the way it moved, its musculature, its tail) which told them it was not a dog.

Anthropological knowledge, scientific knowledge and the liminality of the unknown

During the course of my fieldwork I visited the local scrap yard my informants had repeatedly mentioned, hoping to interview the dealer, and maybe catch sight of something linking him to the apocryphal leopards he was

rumoured to have released. However, I was greeted by several large, vociferous (almost black) dogs who hurled themselves at the chained iron gates, but no sign of the man himself (nor his feline companions). Coincidentally a few weeks later he too disappeared without trace; according to the local press he had moved to Ireland so as to avoid a court appearance. This was frustrating bad luck as it meant I was unable to verify my informants' memories! Nonetheless, the scrap yard itself represented the ideal place to have been the former abode of mysterious big cats. The piles of tyres, heaps of rusting metal and the scrap man's derelict caravan created a sense of liminality and of transience. This was not a fixed abode, and the culmination of so much matter out of place emphasised the betwixt and between nature of the scrap dealer and his mode of subsistence in relation to the neighbouring farms, whose inhabitants had deep roots and whose livelihood was the 'norm' in the area.

Attributing the presence of cryptids to a liminal or non-normative local is a popular trope in many other ethnographic contexts too. In their work on the Zanzibar leopard for example, a creature thought to be extinct as far as the scientific community is concerned, Martin Walsh and Helle Goldman (this volume) discuss the phenomenon of leopard keeping whereby witches control zoologically extinct leopards to do their evil bidding. Cryptozoological entities are also frequently associated with liminal places and spaces: bogland, waterways, crossroads and gateways are all common locations where sightings occur or where they have occurred historically. Examples include the *kelpie*, a creature widely documented in the myths of the British Isles, and its specifically Welsh equivalent, the *ceffyl dwr* (water horse). Like the fish-tailed beings of South Africa (Bernard, this volume) but taking the shape of a horse, *kelpies* or *ceffylau dwr* are typically encountered along river banks or on bogs where they lure their victims to watery graves. It is easy to rationalise the existence of *ceffylau dwr* in functionalist terms, as a cautionary tale designed to keep children away from potentially dangerous places where real flesh and blood ponies are known to dwell. Having regularly encountered the perils of Welsh bogs during fieldwork, including one unforgettable occasion when the horse I was riding sunk up to his shoulders and flailed in the mud for over half an hour before he was able to pull himself free, I can appreciate why such cautionary tales are important! However, like the landscapes in which they roam, cryptids themselves are liminal because they exist somewhere between the 'known' realm of zoologically recognised, tangible creatures (e.g. Welsh ponies, leopards or dogs) and the scientifically unknown and intangible realm of ghostly apparitions and mythical creatures. Indeed, even though there is a plausible foundation myth, the number of big cat sightings in my fieldwork area is statistically significant, and Coard's forensic analysis suggested (on the basis of tooth pits in sheep and horse carcasses) that the animals she examined had been predated on by a 'medium sized felid', ABCs remain liminal because it is impossible to accurately establish key details such as their species and population size. Consequently they remain 'unknown' to science.

While the liminal nature of cryptids makes them a particularly interesting focus for anthropologists, the 'need' to classify and attempt to ascertain whether they are 'real' or whether they are merely symbolic figments of collective or individual imaginations has made them unattractive academic subjects overall. Ingold (2013a and 2013b) highlights the roots of this problem, arguing that the legitimacy of contemporary science is founded on the pursuit of 'truth' via the validation and revalidation of so-called objective data, with particular consequence for anthropologists who have,

for the most part [...] ridden on the back of the same enterprise. That is to say, they have colluded in the division between [...] the reality of nature that can be discovered only through systematic scientific investigation, and the various imaginary worlds which people in different times and places conjured up and which in their ignorance of science and its methods they have taken for reality.

(2013a: 36; 2013b: 734–735)

Ingold suggests that so long as mainstream science is concerned with 'knowing nature' as an objective reality, separated from our subjective experience, then scientific knowledge and understanding of the world will remain inherently limited. Only when we 'ground knowing in being', when our knowledge of the world emerges out of our experience of living as active subjects within the world, can we really 'know' in any meaningful sense. Although he doesn't refer to them as such, Ingold argues that encounters with cryptids (he uses the examples of medieval dragons and the Ojibwa *pinési* or Thunderbird) can heal the rupture he perceives 'between the real world and our imagination of it' (2013b: 749).

Not all anthropologists are necessarily guilty of the collusion to which Ingold refers. Certainly the recent ontological turn in anthropology has prioritised the diverse realities that exist for our equally diverse ethnographic subjects and repositioned scientific ontology as just one of many ways of seeing the world (e.g. Kohn 2015).

The suggestion that big cats roam the Welsh hills, and the accompanying sightings narratives, typically elicit derisive, sceptical responses from most outsiders including establishment science. In contemporary Wales scientific knowledge is authoritative knowledge, and consequently the tangible 'real' world of zoological species is clearly separated from the intangibility of the 'imaginary' world of apparitions and mythical creatures. Indeed, notwithstanding the case of Mr Disney, there is a reluctance on the part of authorities and the wider general public to accept that ABCs exist even in the face of mounting evidence, including the scientific kind (Coard 2007). However, for locals in this fieldwork context, ABCs are very much 'creatures of experience' and part of the real and 'natural' world, of their world, and of a different order to other cryptids who inhabit the same landscape and yet are

very much creatures of the imagination (cf. Ingold 2013b: 738; 2013b: 41; and 2000: 278–279).

Nonetheless, it might be argued that ABCs occupy a middle ground between what Ingold (2013a and 2013b) has referred to as ‘knowing and being’ or ‘science and imagination’ which once again renders them liminal but also anthropologically useful beings. This middle ground is also occupied by other transgressive creatures. Indeed, non-normative behaviours enacted by scientifically recognised and verifiable animals can also turn them into mythical beings. The so-called lions of Tsavo for example, whose mythic reputation as calculating, bloodthirsty man-eaters went before them and served as justification for their subsequent extermination and exhibition as taxidermied specimens (Wilbert 2006: 34). The middle ground occupied by ABCs is also a good place to emphasise the importance of both scientific and ‘folk’ or experiential ways of knowing and being. Indeed, many anthropologists whose work explores the anthropology of religion have considered the beliefs of their informants to be of interest not because they are true per se, but because their informants believe them to be so. For example, according to Evans-Pritchard:

[the anthropologist] is not concerned *qua* anthropologist, with the truth or falsity of religious thought. As I understand the matter, there is no possibility of his *knowing* whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration. The beliefs are for him sociological facts, not theological facts, and his sole concern is with their relation to each other and to other social facts. His problems are scientific, not metaphysical or ontological.

(1965: 61–62)

Such an approach is also clearly visible in Kay Milton’s work on environmental conservation (2000) where she suggests that anthropologists need not concern themselves with the ‘reality’ of their informants’ beliefs, but rather should record what they say and do, and attempt to analyse and account for those beliefs. Yet it seems that whether our informants’ beliefs are true or false has numerous implications for our subsequent understanding of events and so in practice we often do concern ourselves with just that, seeking to root out and present the ‘truth’. This truth is based on the subjective knowledge we (anthropologists) have acquired in the field and through our academic training, in addition to our records of what our informants say and do. However, even in the wake of the reflexive and ontological turns it is sometimes difficult to avoid prioritising our own interpretations, our own realities, projecting them onto our informants, and in the process claiming an authoritative perspective.

This is something both Willerslev (2007: 19) and Ingold (2000: 76) have previously noted as problematic in relation to anthropological ‘rationalisations’ of animism:

When hunters use terms drawn from the domain of human interaction to describe their relations with animals, they are said to be indulging in metaphor (Bird-David, 1992). But to claim that what is literally true of relations among humans (for example, that they share), is only figuratively true of relations with animals, is to reproduce the very dichotomy between animals and society that the indigenous view purports to reject. We tell ourselves reassuringly that this view the hunters have, of sharing with animals as they would with people, however appealing it might be, does not correspond with what actually happens. For nature, we say, does not *really* share with man [and, for example, horses do not really drag humans to their watery graves]. When hunters assert the contrary it is because the image of sharing is so deeply ingrained in their thought that they can no longer tell the metaphor from the reality. But *we* can, and we insist – on these grounds – that the hunters have got it wrong.

(Ingold 2000: 76)

Before my own ABC encounter and the collation of sightings narratives and forensic data I was reasonably confident that ABCs were nothing more than creatures of the imagination – symbolically redolent metaphors for disenfranchised Welsh farmers. For that short space of time I was guilty of the sort of ethnocentric rejection of indigenous or embodied knowledge which proponents of the ontological turn have foregrounded and which Ingold critiques in the quote above. However, my resultant belief in these cryptids is not simply the result of knowing them through experience, as even though the experience was visceral, I doubted myself in the cold light of day. Rather, they have become real through the combination of my embodied experience, the shared experiences of others, the outcomes of post-mortem analysis of live-stock carcasses, patterns of predation, and the recurring stories surrounding the scrap dealer and his feline companions. This combination of different methods, of different ways in which cryptids can be known, has led to ABCs becoming real as far as I am concerned. Cryptozoology is not, therefore, just the search for animals that are unknown to science. It can and should be about the process through which cryptids come to be known, and they come to be known by the variety of means by which we come to know about any other being in the world. They are, therefore, important but neglected anthropological subjects.

Conclusion: cryptid conservation?

Cryptids, along with creatures who fit comfortably into taxonomic categories, are ‘known’ by many people in many places ‘by their traditions’, i.e. the stories which people told about them, and which continue to unfold through time (Sax 2001; 2013; Ingold 2013a; 2013b). Both Ingold (2013a; 2013b) and Sax (2001) note that every creature, whether real or imagined, has a tradition and this tradition continues when its name is uttered, or if its call is heard, or

if it is sighted, or if it acts. Moreover, these animal traditions are of particular significance in the Anthropocene, when humans have ‘far more power than wisdom’ because ‘[t]o preserve an animal as a tradition, we must know it intimately, we must be familiar with the lore that has grown up around the creature since time immemorial’ (Sax 2001: xi).

As per the *molimo*, a creature of Mbuti mythology described by Turnbull (1961), whose voice emanates from the forest in response to human calls during ritual celebrations, some cryptids tend to have what might be termed a performative identity in the sense that their reality is confirmed when individuals encounter them (or are familiar with the encounters of family members or others whose testimonies they trust, or when science or local history provides evidence or precedent). Ingold argues that as individuals move through landscapes, interacting with other animals, plants, topographical features and weather fronts, their knowledge of the natural world is formed. Individuals who encounter ABCs may process their encounters in relation to their knowledge and experience of the natural world – comparing the animal out of place with familiar animals (e.g. dogs or horses) who they would expect to encounter in rural west Wales! The ‘reality’ of cryptids then is largely dependent on each individual’s experiences not just of them, but of ‘nature’ more generally. Encounters with cryptids arise from or rather constitute what Ingold has termed ‘performative knowledge’. Drawing on Ojibwe performative knowledge of another cryptid, the *pinési* or Thunderbird, Ingold (2000) observes that for the Ojibwe, thunder is the cry of *manitou* (spirits). Humans have the capacity to understand their cries as spoken language, because for the Ojibwe ‘the truth of things is not only found but also tested by personal oneiric experience’ (2013a: 42), and many Ojibwe have ‘heard’ or received messages from thunder. Ingold suggests that this is in stark contrast to ‘Western’ knowledge of thunder which emphasises the physical mechanisms of shifting and unstable air currents, as discovered in laboratory experiments. Maybe the reality of thunder lies somewhere between the two positions? Certainly for many of the cases explored in this volume cryptids can be explained or accounted for differently according to different perspectives. However, this relativism causes problems for those concerned with classifying the world, as anthropologists often are (Ingold 2013a and 2013b).

Ingold (2013a and 2013b) suggests that there was a departure in the European intellectual tradition from being informed by nature (and human experiences in and of the natural world) to the prioritising of scientific knowledge at the onset of Modernity. In such a context there was no longer any place for dragons or other fantastical beings other than as cautionary tales and symbols of human achievement or folly. Rather than being known performatively by traditions founded on direct experience of them (or stories of past experiences of them), creatures were classified into bounded entities, i.e. species. Any who were known by tradition alone therefore, such as dragons, and whose presence or existence could not be corroborated by science, became problematic and obsolete.

The ABCs I encountered second-hand during fieldwork via their traditions, and the individual ABC Max and I encountered directly on our nocturnal walk, remain 'unknown' to science, despite Coard's forensic data, because of the lack of a captured specimen who could then be examined, DNA-tested and located within a particular taxonomic group. At present all that can be 'known' is that there is probably at least one medium-large sized felid with dark pelage, who has escaped or been released from captivity, roaming the hills and valleys of West Wales. Welsh ABCs (or at least this particular ABC) remain creatures of the imagination but not imaginary creatures (cf. Monbiot 2013). They are known both by the humans who encounter them and by the sheep and horses (and other animals) whose lives sustain theirs. However, rather than wanting to find and kill ABCs in retaliation for livestock losses as might be expected, the farmers and other rural dwellers who encounter them (in this context at least cf. Franklin, this volume), feel strongly they should be protected, precisely because of their symbolic potency – they are admired for their ability to survive against the odds. King (this volume) argues that it is important for anthropologists to protect the cryptids they encounter in the field, and certainly in this case too the conservation of ABCs is synonymous with the conservation of local ways of life, and local ways of being in the world. They have an origin myth, and a tradition within local rural communities, and their liminal reality – as unknown yet knowable zoological as opposed to imaginary beings – demonstrates that scientific and other ways of knowing are not mutually exclusive, and that cryptids (like other matter out of place) should be taken as seriously by anthropologists as they are by our informants in the field.

Notes

- 1 There is fossil evidence for dinosaurs in Wales (e.g. Galton et al. 2007) and there is precedent for fossilised dinosaur remains being interpreted as mythological beings such as dragons (e.g. Mayor 2001).
- 2 While big cat sightings were accepted within the farming community, the newspapers reporting on Mr Disney's experience also covered urban areas where big cat sightings were not typically made (see also Franklin, this volume).

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